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Book Review: Christopher Zurn: *Axel Honneth. A Critical Theory of the Social*. (Key Contemporary Thinkers Series) Cambridge: Polity 2015; Kenneth Baynes: *Habermas*. (Routledge Philosophers) New York, Abingdon: Routledge 2016.

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- Author's version -

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As prominent representatives of German critical theory, Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth are at the center of many debates in contemporary political theory. Outside of expert circles of critical theory, however, their most prominent writings are often discussed in isolation from the larger theoretical questions that animate their work. It is therefore fortunate that two new introductions aim to present systematic evaluations of their works and to reconstruct their central ideas.

The central idea of Baynes's *Habermas* is "Kantian pragmatism", i.e. the view "that human knowledge [...] is structured by our cognitive faculties and rooted in (more or less stable) social practices" (222). In other words, it is a socialized version of Kantianism that one may equally well call "Hegelian". Kantian pragmatism is taken to be an answer to the question of how to make sense of human rationality in the light of the insights of the natural sciences – namely, as both the capacity to participate in practices of communication and that which grounds the social status of interlocutor in these practices. In the philosophy of the human sciences, Kantian pragmatism allows Habermas to defend the necessity of the participant perspective and the "manifest image" of the person against naturalist reductionism. In moral philosophy, it allows him to adopt a constructivist interpretation of moral discourse that makes possible the integration of contextual insights. In political theory, Kantian pragmatism allows for the grounding of legal authority in the presuppositions of political self-determination.

Baynes's rich and competent reconstruction of Habermas's work deserves much more commentary than this review allows. Regarding the themes mentioned thus far, he not only provides a clear summary of Habermas's position but also discusses the most important objections raised against it and contrasts it with the views of other contemporary authors. This strategy of presenting Habermas's position as part of a larger dialogue is especially pronounced with regards to three topics. In chapter four, he systematically compares Habermas's "Kantian pragmatism" with Robert Brandom's "normative pragmatism". In chapter five, he discusses Habermas's discourse ethics in comparison with Thomas Scanlon's metaethical theory. And finally, since Habermas developed his

legal and political theory (discussion of which makes up approximately one-third of Baynes's book in chapters six and seven) in explicit dialogue with various authors in the liberal tradition, this topic also naturally lends itself to this form of presentation.

Two features of this strategy warrant closer attention. First, Baynes uses objections as an opportunity to develop an interpretation of Habermas's claims that can withstand their critique. We can thus read his book as a defense of Habermas rather than a mere summary. Baynes provides what he takes to be the most reasonable reformulation of Habermas's basic ideas. Even Habermas experts (and especially Habermas skeptics) will learn much from considering these reformulations.

Second, as mentioned above, Baynes's exposition of Habermas's central ideas takes the form of a dialogue with other contemporary, mostly liberal, philosophers. This is extremely helpful for clarifying what is at stake in these debates and for showing why people working in ethics (or liberal political theory) should engage with Habermas. It underlines the significance of Habermas's theory even for philosophers who do not buy into the Frankfurt School project or Habermas's broader social theory. Since many representatives of contemporary liberal philosophy scarcely engage with issues of social theory, this decision leads Baynes to focus on Habermas's work after *TCA*, to which approximately two-thirds of the book is dedicated. Habermas's earlier, more socio-theoretic writings are treated less as a subject of ongoing debate and more as historical background.

Baynes's introduction presupposes knowledge about the relevant debates and is therefore perhaps better suited to graduate students and professional scholars. Zurn's *Axel Honneth* is more self-contained and thus also more accessible to the philosophical novice. Like Baynes, Zurn focuses on a central idea rather than reconstructing Honneth's theory from the perspective of central controversies in continental social philosophy (which is Jean-Philippe Deranty's strategy in his excellent *Beyond Communication*). Central to Zurn's Honneth is the idea that human beings depend on various forms of recognition and that this need for recognition is both a fundamental component of social integration and the driving force of social change. Accordingly, roughly the first half of the book is devoted to outlining the individual-psychological and social dimensions of recognition theory. The second half discusses Honneth's concept of social pathologies, the Honneth-Fraser debate about recognition and markets, and the development of Honneth's theories in *Freedom's Right*. Zurn's discussion of these topics is informed by a wide range of sources and covers the main objections that scholars have raised against Honneth's account. The core of recognition theory, on his account, is an anthropological thesis about the importance of recognition, even though particular forms of recognition are taken to be a subject of historical change and social and political struggles. The three dimensions of love, respect and esteem will be familiar to any Honneth reader. However, Honneth leaves open how to integrate the idea of "fundamental recognition" (developed in his *Reification* book) into his overall theory. Zurn argues that we should see it as a fourth dimension of

recognition that provides something like a transcendental condition for the other forms. The debate between Honneth and Fraser is interpreted as being partly about the empirical question of the extent to which norms of esteem really drive (potentially conflictual) social developments and partly about the universality of the norms that derive from these anthropological assumptions. The idea of “social pathologies” is ultimately taken to be a methodological tool that is relatively independent of more substantial theoretical claims.

Generally speaking, Zurn reads Honneth as providing an anthropologically informed basis for a liberal ethics. To be sure, Zurn is careful to avoid the misunderstanding that recognition theory is only about contemporary “identity politics” and emphasizes that Honneth develops this theory based in part on insights into the moral character of workers’ struggles. He reads recognition theory as a broad answer to questions of justice in general – from this perspective, it is not surprising that Zurn returns repeatedly to issues like multiculturalism and LGBTQ struggles to illustrate the importance of recognition, issues that (perhaps regrettably) occupy a relatively marginal space in Honneth’s theory. This is perhaps because these struggles are more at the center of public debate at the moment (compared with working class resistance). However, Zurn’s reading also makes clear that even on this wider interpretation, “recognition” is mainly understood as a general term for socially shared structures of normative valuation, independently of its application to specific political questions.

It is perhaps worthwhile to examine how Baynes and Zurn address a cluster of challenges inevitably faced by introductions to versions of critical theory in the Frankfurt School tradition. One of these challenges is the interdisciplinarity of research. Another challenge is the reflexive character of critical theories – while Habermas and Honneth do not share the first generation’s radical skepticism towards the idea of self-standing philosophical reflection, they share the intuition that philosophy cannot be separated from social analysis. No matter how close Habermas and Honneth come to contemporary liberal theorizing, this intuition keeps them from adopting the perspective of “ideal theory”. Most importantly, however, the Frankfurt School tradition views philosophical critical theory as inextricably bound to critical social analysis of capitalist society. It is a fundamental belief of the first generation that capitalism is a form of society that achieves social integration as a totality only by suppressing and obscuring social contradiction and that the central task of philosophy is to supply conceptual models that can grasp this phenomenon. Although Habermas and Honneth do not endorse the conception of totality implicit in that view, the challenge to create concepts in a political philosophy that adequately capture the internal tensions and contradictions of the capitalist mode of socialization is still at the core of their theoretical projects. Habermas’s *Legitimation Crisis* is one attempt to come to terms with this idea by taking up and critically transforming insights from systems theory. Honneth’s *Critique of Power* argues that, even

when we accept the fact of social differentiation, we also have to understand capitalist market integration according to a model that allows us to see how relations of power suppress or disarm normative conflicts.

One way (but certainly not the only way) to approach Habermas's and Honneth's intellectual trajectories is to see their theories as attempts to come to terms with this idea. This separates them to some degree from other contemporary moral and political theorists. As I have tried to make clear, Baynes and Zurn show that this separation does not preclude a dialogue and that the insights that Habermas and Honneth draw from their social theorizing enable them to construct arguments that liberals can engage with without having to buy into the framework of analysis of late capitalism. From this perspective, Habermas's discourse ethics is more interesting than his concept of "systematically distorted communication" or his colonization thesis. Honneth's concept of social pathologies will similarly be only one particular item in the toolbox of an anthropologically inspired critique of social systems that are problematic from the perspective of a "formal conception of the good life". From the perspective of the project of classic critical theory, however, these concepts lie at the very core of their work, informing their more constructive approaches at every turn.

I would like to illustrate this difference by looking at how Baynes's and Zurn's works deal with two familiar systematic issues in Habermas and Honneth.

In the case of Habermas, this concerns discourse ethics. Baynes defends Habermas against various objections, among them the familiar argument that the principles generated by discourse ethics are so formal that they lack substantive content. To answer this objection, Baynes first deploys a "partners in crime" argument to the effect that the same objection can be made against Scanlon (122). Second, and more importantly, he argues that substantive ideals of mutual respect are "mirrored in the procedure itself" (121). However, the way these ideals play out under conditions of modern pluralism leads to a situation where only very abstract moral principles can be justified, and more and more questions are treated as questions of ethics (rather than morality). At the same time, it is only under these modern conditions that the idea of moral justification can be combined with the idea of individual autonomy, which equips the former with an "explosive and unsettling force" (120). In other words, the norms of moral justification and moral principles have a contextual dimension that leads to the seemingly paradoxical conclusion that the more demanding our idea of moral justification becomes, the more actual discourses can only generate principles that are highly abstract (and thus in need of political interpretation). As a representation of the best interpretation of Habermas's view, this is very convincing. But it also points to an insight concerning the possibility of substantive moral philosophy in modern, rationalized societies that can only be properly understood if one treats social theory as relevant to ethical theory. This is, of course, an insight that is not available to more traditional moral philosophers like Scanlon. In other

words, even when one discusses Habermas's contributions to conventional moral and metaethical theorizing, the outcomes of that discussion include social-theoretic insights that are not readily intelligible within these debates.

In the case of Honneth, I would like to illustrate my point by reference to the question whether recognition theory can adequately deal with markets. To answer this question, Zurn argues, we must examine whether recognition in the sense of "normative evaluation" is among the causal factors that determine the distribution of economic resources by markets. Zurn reads Honneth as wavering between a strong but unconvincing version of the claim (that all misdistribution can be attributed to some specific pattern of misrecognition) and a weak but perhaps trivial version ("that, at an abstract level, recognition must be counted as one of several different ineliminable variables relevant to explaining market dynamics", 141). Zurn argues that the strength of the weaker version depends on a systematic theory of capitalism, which Honneth has not delivered thus far (153). This is correct, but there is also a perhaps more radical interpretation of the market problem that raises issues related to social theory in general. If it is both true that markets are embedded in normative frameworks (134) and that market participants generally see themselves as merely self-interested actors (135), it might be the case that markets effectively implement an ideal of recognition only so long as participants systematically deny that their interaction is governed by norms of recognition. This might be a conceptual point about market recognition that does not depend on a substantial explanatory theory of capitalism. Against Honneth's perhaps more modest intentions, we might read his theory as allowing us to question the internal form of the recognition regime of the market independently of empirical claims about the determinants of market outcomes (an interpretation that continues to be available in *Freedom's Right*).

Both books demonstrate that Habermas and Honneth can be read either as sociologically informed contributors to the larger project of a liberal theory of justice and democracy or as more skeptical analysts of deep, intrinsic contradictions in the project of liberal modernity. Zurn's and Baynes's choice to address an audience that is more interested in the former perspective than the latter is entirely legitimate and will (hopefully) contribute to our shared project of motivating many students to engage more deeply with these thinkers. Once they do so, however, they will find that Habermas's discourse ethics and Honneth's discussion of the market as a recognition order are only two examples of theoretical moves that perhaps can only be fully appreciated once one takes a more sociologically radical perspective.